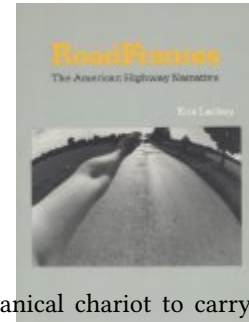


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kris Lackey. *RoadFrames: The American Highway Narrative*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. xiv + 164 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2924-2.

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What has “the road” meant to American travelers? Kris Lackey attempts to answer this question, building on his extensive reading and experience in teaching what must have been a fascinating class at the University of New Orleans—“The American Highway Narrative.”

Professor Lackey finds his study on fifty nonfictional and fifteen fictional narratives written in the age of the automobile. Most of the time, he is able to direct the traffic of all the titles he has read, by favoring ample accounts of a given narrative’s relevance before moving on. Most of the time, too, Lackey is able to shape what he says about even the more mawkish effusions of road-entranced narrators into substantial, even witty assessments of public transportation, the illusion of an independent self and choices that can be made as easily as a turn of the steering wheel, the possibility of a new self to be discovered in transit, the experiential costs of speed and always moving on, the anticipation of conflict for black travelers, and, finally, the possibility of loss, a trip to nowhere.

While the structure fills out the parts of a larger story, it does so at some expense of any given text being examined, especially since, of necessity, different aspects of the same work may be examined in different chapters. Except in the last two chapters, on black travel narratives and on (white) romances of the road, *RoadFrames* is only indirectly a “reader’s guide” to books of travel. Neither is it, primarily, cultural history or sociology; the binding elements are experiential or literary-philosophical (transcendental).

Professor Lackey finds one large contradiction, one nullity, aspirations of transcendence, and contrarian views. The large contradiction, underlying everything, has to do with our eager acceptance of technology, the

dynamo with wheels, our mechanical chariot to carry us into the not-quite virgin land. When the automobile drives smoothly, the gap between subject and object can disappear in a glow of union with country; when it doesn’t, we can be slaves to the damned machine. A novel like *The Grapes of Wrath* shows, among other things, the extent to which an overloaded, failing vehicle can narrow the whole consciousness to its every hesitation. By the same token, black narratives show how the insecurity of travel in white America can short circuit the personal sense of freedom needed for a Romantic epiphany. And nullity awaits one in the dazed consciousness, the numbing of perception that accompanies so much interstate travel, leading someone like Least Heat-Moon to take the slower drives on “blue highways.”

The aspiration to or expression of transcendence often has religious overtones. “Americans have found the healing of God in a variety of things, the most pleasant of which is probably automobile drives,” asserts William Saroyan in 1966. Not that *RoadFrames* heralds the advent of a religion of Ford or Chevrolet, but it does envision the automobile as a doorway, or better, a window on what we call America. The speed that fills the window with images, like a film screen, serializes shapes and outlines and loses the details in light more or less intense than is optimal for traditional photography or realistic painting. It’s not surprising then that peak experiences tend to be cast in personal feeling ungrounded in place. From Dallas Sharp’s *The Better Country* (1928) comes this gem: “The wheels of my being synchronized perfectly with the wheels of my going, all that was within me meshing with all that was without, my spirit sliding from first to second, from second into high and back into reverse without grabbing of the clutch or any clashing of the gears.” (Before such ascension, one wants to ask whether such

union is possible with an automatic transmission and cruise control.) Of the transcendental journeys, Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* earns praise for its acknowledgment of the difficulties of union, mediated by technology, with a reality which must be extricated from the subjective, media-induced, images of it.

*RoadFrames* is that rare book that seems hand-crafted, carefully wrought sentence by sentence. The quotations, often from books like *The Better Country* that one would not likely read, are choice. I found myself marking them, as epigrams one wants to be able to locate. By the same token, Lackey is not lacking in shrewdly worded judgments himself, notable for their restraint in the face of excess. (One is happy that the books beneath scorn were filtered out of consideration.) While he occasionally packs his sentences too densely, the sense of what he says is given impact by its verbal recasting. They are worth stopping for, to reread. It's a sheen or polish that deepens the grain.

One thing apparent from Lackey's search through these road books: while some of them (*Blue Highways*) are filled with interesting local encounters, the best literature of place is probably written by those who settle, rather than those who travel. Gretel Ehrlich in the open spaces of Wyoming, Edward Abee, solitary in the desert of Utah, Annie Dillard in the Virginia mountains—all people who arrived at a location and chose to write from that place. Like Thoreau, they tend walk or sit more than they ride. For many of the road writers, the rush of the air, the blends of color and light are more important than place.

The more effusive streams of highway consciousness are not remarkably different from the high moments of those who pilot planes or small boats, sky-dive, runners, or even those who imaginatively travel through computer networks in "cyberpunk" science fiction. (Would they even be different from the highs of other, non American travel literature? )

Unless there are profound changes in our culture, Professor Lackey will not need to update his study any time soon. But who knows? Perhaps a new kind of narrative will issue forth from the upper-middle-class nomads whose homes are motorized, with differently located communities for each season. Presumably, such a narrative would return to the themes of domesticity and community that were once significant. And one can discern a number of possibilities spinning off from *Roadframes*: a fully illustrated, abbreviated-text coffee table version, with some of the choicer quotations for photo cutlines; an extension and testing of Professor Lackey's themes and patterns in film, television series, or advertisements. For now, however, Professor Lackey's study surely bids fair to become the authoritative analysis of American road narratives.

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